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ABSTRACT

A 1991 study of non-returning students at Del Mar College (DMC), in Corpus Christi, Texas, revealed that only 37.9% of these students were actual dropouts (i.e., had failed to accomplish their educational goals, and had no plans to take up further study). Retention studies conducted in Texas between 1985 and 1989 have shown that DMC has consistently maintained a retention rate higher than the statewide average. Colleges seeking to improve student retention should focus on registration/advising, student services, and survival skills. In the area of registration, colleges can provide a public relations staff to assist students during this initial period. In addition, students should meet with an advisor by the end of the first semester and complete an Education Plan. An ideal advising system would include an Advising Center, staffed by trained personnel. Students could seek out an advisor when they first enter the college, to change their major, or for personal problems. In the area of student services, providing for student government can give students a feeling of personal involvement in the development of college policies and activities. Also, providing peer tutors, as well as concise information on available campus and community services and resources, can help students address personal needs which might otherwise lead them to dropout. Concerning survival skills (e.g., stress management, critical thinking, and study skills), the college should create special courses and/or videos and other media to help students develop these skills, and policies should be adopted to discourage course dropping. DMC retention data are included. (PAA)

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MEETING INDIVIDUAL NEEDS FOSTERS RETENTION

May 1992

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Paper presented at the Annual International Conference of the National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development on Teaching Excellence and Conference of Administrators (14th, Austin, TX, May 24-27, 1992).

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MEETING INDIVIDUAL NEEDS FOSTERS RETENTION

Two-year and four-year institutions have some of the same concerns, with one of the major concerns being how to best serve their student population and help them fulfill their goals. Much of what is said involving the student body for two-year colleges is also applicable to the students of four-year institutions, and while the senior institution presents some unique challenges in meeting student needs, the community college also has distinctive demands due to its multifaceted role. While most academic institutions place a high priority (in both time and funding) on student recruitment techniques, Alexander Astin[1] proposes an argument for more investment in student retention.

> In four-year institutions, any change that deters students from dropping out can affect three classes of students at once, whereas any change in recruiting practices can affect only one class in a given year. From this viewpoint, investing resources to prevent dropping out may be more 'cost effective' than applying the same resources to more vigorous recruitment. More important from an educational standpoint, changes that help students complete college represent a real service to them, whereas successful recruiting efforts may simply change students' choice of institutions.

Some demographic studies show that student retention rates at both two-year and four-year colleges have been worsening since the mid-1960's[2] regardless of gender, ethnicity, and social class. Studies of retention rates in Texas two-year community colleges from 1985 to 1989 show the reverse trend. Figure 1 charts one-year retention rates for Del Mar College (DMC) students versus the average for all Texas community colleges. Both show a definite positive trend. It should be recognized that community college students are not always retained in the same institution and that they frequently transfer to another community college, to a senior institution, or even concurrently attend both a community college and a senior institution. The following charts reflect these additional possibilities. Figure 2 expands the trends for DMC students based on ethnicity (along with the same state average). Figure 2a shows the migration of each ethnic group for one sample year (1988). Texas, with its large minority population, is making strong gains in retention within its two-year academic institutions. However, only one-half of the ideal goal has been reached. What of the other 50% that do not remain in school?

Too often the success of a community college is based on the percentage of students receiving degrees, while those students not returning to college are

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[1]Astin, A.W. (1975). *Preventing students from dropping out*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, p.2.

[2]Eagle, E. and Arnold, C. (1990, April). *Trends in postsecondary persistence revisited: Decreasing persistence or changing educational goals?* Paper presented at the American Educational Research Association, Boston.

classified as dropouts, and chalked-up as failures on academic statistical reports. This not only gives the nonreturning students a failure image, but it does not adequately describe the success/failure of the two-year institution with its highly diverse role.

When one is speaking of retention at the community college, s/he must understand that not everyone who fails to return to school should be considered a dropout. At DMC, if students plan to return after an absence of a semester or two they are called *stopouts*. If some students only intended to take a few classes, and stopped attending after they had accomplished this educational goal, they are called *optouts*. The only persons labeled *dropouts* are those who failed to accomplish their educational goals and have no definite plans to accomplish those goals later. Of course, the only way to distinguish among stopouts, optouts, and dropouts is to personally ask individuals about their past, present, and future goals. Del Mar College, in conjunction with the Adult and Extension Education Program, College of Education, Texas A&M University, did such a survey in 1990. Much of the data which follows comes from that study.[3]

If institutions can understand: 1) why students initially attend their college, 2) why students do not return to their college, and 3) how the nonreturnees feel about the college after they leave, the institution can provide a retention policy that will meet the needs of their individual students. The following charts are based on the 2313 DMC students who did not return for the Spring 1991 semester from among the 10,538 total students who registered for the Fall 1990 semester. Figure 3 shows the percentages for each category for the 2313 nonreturnees. Only about 37.9% of students are actually dropouts (as DMC has defined this term). Figure 4 shows the reasons which students gave for not returning. It is interesting that the three main reasons given were not academically based.

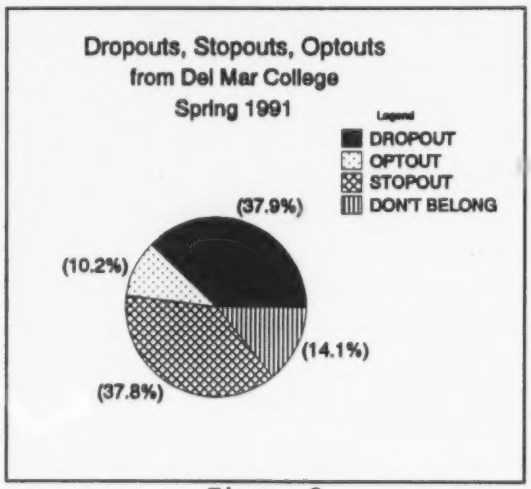


Figure 3

Figures 5 and 6 show how these students felt about DMC and their college experience, even though they did not return. As can be seen, their feelings were predominantly positive, with the largest negative and undecided feelings concerning things that happened in school, but not in class. This may imply that the question was too vague, or that the institution is not meeting student needs

[3]Contact Jo Ann Luckie, Del Mar College for further information concerning the Joint Research Project titled *Dropouts, Stopouts, Optouts*. (Spring 1991).

outside of the classroom setting. (These results are just representative of those who did not return and do not represent those students who did choose to return to DMC.)

Figures 7 and 8 show some of the top reasons why the nonreturnees initially decided to attend DMC. It is interesting to note that the major reason given was "for personal improvement" and that "to be with interesting people" was also rated highly. Perhaps this is indicative that more needs to be done to provide a social/cultural background for today's students, especially in the community college, where such a large percentage of the student body is composed of part-time students, carrying fewer than 12 credit hours (65% at DMC), and working part- or full-time.

The following suggestions, the basis for the Del Mar College retention policy, are offered as a means to improve retention at any community college. The Del Mar College motto is "**Comprehensive Community Education Meeting Individual Needs.**" Since this is an open-ended and encompassing promise, the college must be especially careful not to promise what it cannot fulfill. The retention of students is a direct result of the institution's ability to fulfill this promise. In order to do so, the college must provide quality course instruction and quality faculty contact with the student both in and out of the classroom, and must involve the student support services to their fullest. The retention policy in the process of being implemented at DMC is designed to support and to fulfill this bold promise.

In order to meet the individual's needs, the college must be highly diverse, providing occupational/technical/industrial training, career programs and transfer options, as well as Associate Degrees. To successfully provide such a variety of educational services to a student body of all ages, cultures, socio-economic backgrounds, varied aspirations, and academic preparations necessitates a commitment by all persons and administrations associated with the college.

Faculty/staff interactions with the student occur on many levels, and the college must try to ensure that each instance is a positive learning experience for the student. It is recognized that there is also a commitment required of the student to the institution, but, frequently the college with the "Open-door Admission Policy" must take extra pains to educate the students to their own responsibilities toward their academic education. The policy that follows tries to address this issue as well. The critical areas for the majority of students fall under three general headings:

I. Registration/Advising
II. Student Services
III. Survival Skills

I. REGISTRATION/ADVISING

Registration and advising periods are critical times for students, especially for those students who are having their first college experience (*i.e.*

incoming freshmen from high school and new special-populations students).

A. REGISTRATION: It is reasonable to assume that if students discover acceptance during the first and most difficult stages of entrance into college, success and its resultant retention will follow. One suggestion is that the college provide public relations' staff to assist students during this sometimes frustrating period.

Students should be required (after their first semester) to have seen an advisor, and have completed an Education Plan, in order to register for succeeding semesters. There should be a standardized educational plan for all undeclared majors which would establish basics in history, math, English, science and kinesiology. These should be courses which, at the college level, are transferable to most four-year universities, or are applicable to Associate degrees at the community college.

B. ADVISING: The college must provide quality education while simultaneously allowing open access to all programs, being careful to tone down the academically unprepared student's unrealistic aspirations, but at the same time not causing the student to accept less than s/he can be. This requires quality advising.

At a large number of community colleges the full-time faculty have the responsibility to advise students. However, because most faculty are not formally trained to be advisers, they frequently feel unqualified in this role, especially since the education plan that the advisor fills out with the student constitutes a legal contract between the college and the student. Secondly, under this system faculty most times will advise during office hours, which severely limits the amount of time which can be spent with any individual student. In addition, many college policies now require each and every student to see an advisor prior to registration (or preregistration) in order to comply with TASP regulations that a student be under continuous advisement. This puts a great strain on this "advising system" just prior to registration--a strain felt by students and faculty alike.

The ideal advising system would be to have an "Advising Center" staffed by personnel trained as advisors who have all the necessary catalogs, lists of universities, requirements, etc. right at their fingertips, and where the student knows s/he can always go for assistance. The cost of providing such an "Advising Center" would be considerable. However, the system described initially could be realigned to be more efficient and more "student-friendly." The following describes one such realignment:

1) Students would need formal advising only for the following:

(a) When they first enter college. At this time they would be assigned an advisor, commensurate with their declared major; an educational plan would be set up with the student; and the student would be trained in the use of the catalog and the class schedule (*i.e.* identifying prerequisite REM levels and

prerequisite classes). Explanation of academic policies (*i.e.* W's, WF's, GPA, drops, etc.) would take place then also. Once the foregoing is accomplished, the students would not be required to see their advisor again unless their situation is described by one of the options in (b) or (c).

(b) If they desire to change their major. At this time an educational plan for the new major would be set up, and any questions pertaining to the new major would be answered.

(c) If they feel the need to talk to their advisor concerning their own special problems, or to adjust or alter their present educational plans.

2) Students would be expected to plan their own class load each semester and set up their semester schedule for registration (and preregistration) following their individual educational plans and relying on their previous training (see 1a above). Such an expectation would put them in line with what is expected of students when they get to the university. However, all students would know that their advisors would be available if the need arose.

3) No formal advising would be necessary prior to registration (or preregistration) as long as the student was following his/her educational plan. This would lighten the present advising load considerably for both student and advisor. The student would come to registration with a complete schedule already planned out. But, in order for registration to occur, the student's folder must contain the proper educational plan that is in line with the classes for which the student is registering.

The system described above would be easily implemented if students must see an advisor prior to preregistration. At this time the advisor could ensure that the training outlined in 1a above is accomplished, and that the student does in fact have an educational plan set up. After this no further advising would be necessary unless 1b or 1c came into effect. Because of the training that would be required (1a), it is probable that advising periods would have to be much longer initially, but subsequent advising should then require only a minimal amount of time.

4) There should be inservice training on a college level available for the faculty advisors so that all advisors will be relatively consistent in their methods and how they, in turn, will train and advise their students. The inservice training might be done by the Counseling Office personnel, as they have had the most experience in this area and know what is available in the Counseling Office by way of catalogs, career information and such, or how to obtain the information needed for each major. Each department throughout the college should also have available a library of catalogs and literature pertaining to the majors they advise. Establishing and maintaining this library could be a faculty assignment.

II. STUDENT SERVICES

Frequently poor student retention is not the result of academic difficul-

ties, but the result of personal circumstances (see figure 4). The college has to act in such a way as to integrate the student into the social, as well as the intellectual, life of the institution. In addition, education pertaining to the available community support services may sometimes make a decided difference as to what occurs--retention or attrition.

A. STUDENT GOVERNMENT: The student will respond more favorably to activities s/he has a personal involvement or interest in. Del Mar College presently has a Student Development Department (SDD) to provide students with programs and activities to complement their educational process. The student organization part of this department is the Student Development Advisory Committee (SDAC), comprised of thirteen students who have applied for positions on the Committee. SDAC has accomplished some significant goals in the past, and could possibly be even more effective with more and better publicity (*i.e.* a regular column in the weekly newspaper, the "Foghorn"). Students are not always aware that they have a voice in the decisions made in and by the college through their representatives in SDAC. Serious consideration might be given to the advisability of having positions in SDAC come about by student-body vote, rather than by application. The ideas behind SDAC need to be encouraged and publicized so that students feel that Del Mar College is **their college** and that their voice is important to the college. This concept is important to the vitality of any student body.

B. TUTORIALS: Presently, the DMC Student Development Department recruits tutors from among students (based on their GPA and grade in the class they will tutor) who are then assigned to at-risk students who apply at SDD for help. Because many DMC students work or have family commitments, it is not always easy to find a tutor with the same time-schedule. In addition, because DMC is a community college, without upper-level students, tutors for the sophomore-level classes, or even the second-semester of full one-year classes, are very difficult to find as they have either graduated from DMC, have transferred to four-year universities, or are not interested in tutoring due to their heavy class load before graduation. This situation is inherent to all two-year institutions.

Tutorial Labs, where tutors are assigned to be in a predetermined classroom for certain hours each week, might be a better use of a tutorial pool. In addition to student tutors, faculty members and/or full-time aides might also be utilized. The concept of a tutorial lab encourages students getting together in study groups in the lab, knowing that help is available when they have difficulty doing the work.

C. STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES: Students frequently have diverse needs outside of the classroom, especially when considering the varied ages, cultures, and socio-economic backgrounds of today's community college students. To retain students the college must provide means whereby information about needed campus and community services are readily available to them.

1) Campus Services

The list of campus services available to students at most community colleges is extensive. At Del Mar College the difficulty comes not from lack of services but from student ignorance of their existence. All services (such as academic policies, financial aid, counseling and advising services, tutors, etc.) are mentioned throughout the DMC Catalog. However, two-year institutions have a large number of students with little or no prior college experience, and little or no experience with utilizing college resources. They come to improve their life and/or education, and know little else about what the college offers. The advising process (see I.B) would train the student in the use of the catalog for class scheduling and degree planning, but other methods might be necessary to encourage the full use of the catalog. One suggestion is sending through the mail to each student, when first enrolled (or after a five-year break in attendance), a concise pamphlet outlining the various services available and where further information about these services might be found. This would be not only a handy pocket reference for the student and a guide to the catalog but also a marketing tool to have in the home to show the public that the college cares about its students.

2) Community Services

While the function of a community college is not to provide social services that are available in the community, it must be recognized that the most common reason for dropping out of college is "personal reasons," which frequently translates to child-care problems, marital problems, financial problems, substance abuse problems and other like circumstances. The academic institution can do a great service to its students by providing information as to where students can go locally to find help for their problems. Such information is now available at Del Mar College in a compilation titled "Parent Support Services." Again, the problem is not lack of the service but simple ignorance of its existence. Reference to this listing could be included in the pamphlet suggested in C1 above. This packet of reference materials would also be an excellent marketing tool, showing the public that the college cares and is willing to extend itself to educate the community and truly "meet the individual's needs."

III. SURVIVAL SKILLS

Most community colleges, with their "Open-door Admissions Policy," have a large number of students who are academically unprepared for college-level coursework. However, this does not mean that they are incapable of achieving high academic goals, only that they will require a great deal more assistance in reaching those goals. By accepting these students into its programs the college, in effect, promises that assistance. It is also recognized that some students have highly unrealistic goals, based on their previous educational background or sometimes on their aptitude. In this case the college has an obligation to assist the student in realigning his/her goals (see I.B) without letting the

student accept less than s/he is capable of accomplishing.

Underprepared students have difficulty with such things as note-taking, test-taking, time management, stress management, critical thinking, study skills, and library skills. Yet, these are skills that can be learned and the attendant problems overcome. At the present time Del Mar College utilizes the Achieving College Excellence (ACE 101) Program, with high praise for the course from many of the students who are enrolled. The difficulty arises from the fact that the course is considered remedial, and so it is not always required for many of the students who need it the most.

The student lacking in many of the skills listed above should be strongly encouraged to enroll in a similar survival skills course. However, the student lacking only a few of the skills may not need the entire course. In that case, it is proposed that the college have available for student use videos and/or other media that teach the skills needed. Most colleges have a number of these videos presently in their various departments, which might best be moved to a central location, such as the library, for use during normal library hours. The use of a survival-skills type telecourse might be considered; DMC is implementing such a course. Either way students could "attend class" for the skills they need.

Advisors and classroom instructors would need to encourage the use of the course or the survival skills videos to students at the first sign of difficulty in the classroom instead of allowing their student to "limp along," failing. Perhaps the videos might be made a course requirement for the student having difficulty. This would have to be a personal decision made by each instructor, depending upon the course, or the student's advisor. But, it is hoped that all faculty members would extend the needed help to a student in trouble in their classes.

Colleges frequently makes it very easy to drop unwanted courses, which is the path of least resistance taken by many underprepared students. Perhaps the college would better serve its student body by ensuring that the students learn the skills necessary to succeed, instead of encouraging the practice of dropping a class. There are many ways this might be accomplished:

(1) Change the drop policy from one which allows drops up to a week before final exams, to one in which the student must decide before midterm whether s/he is going to drop the class. After that date a drop would be allowed only for highly extenuating circumstances (*i.e.* hospitalized sickness, moving out of town, etc.).

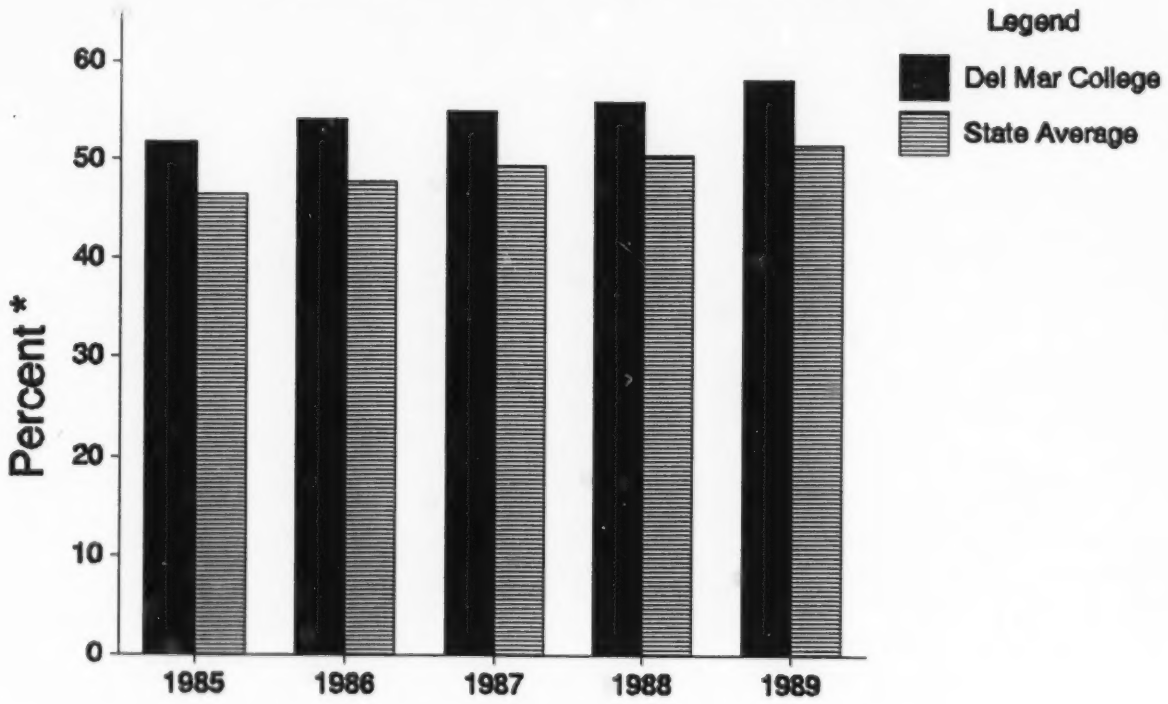
(2) Require students to meet with their instructor before they drop. This would work well with the change in drop date mentioned in (1) so that there would still be sufficient time for the instructor to help the students correct his or her deficiencies and pass the class.

(3) Educate the student body as to the finality of all entries on

their transcripts, and remind them that most major universities now look at all courses attempted in determining whom they will accept. A large number of W's and WF's does not bode well for the student.

Figure 1

One-Year Student Retention Rates
Texas Public Community Colleges
Del Mar vs State Average

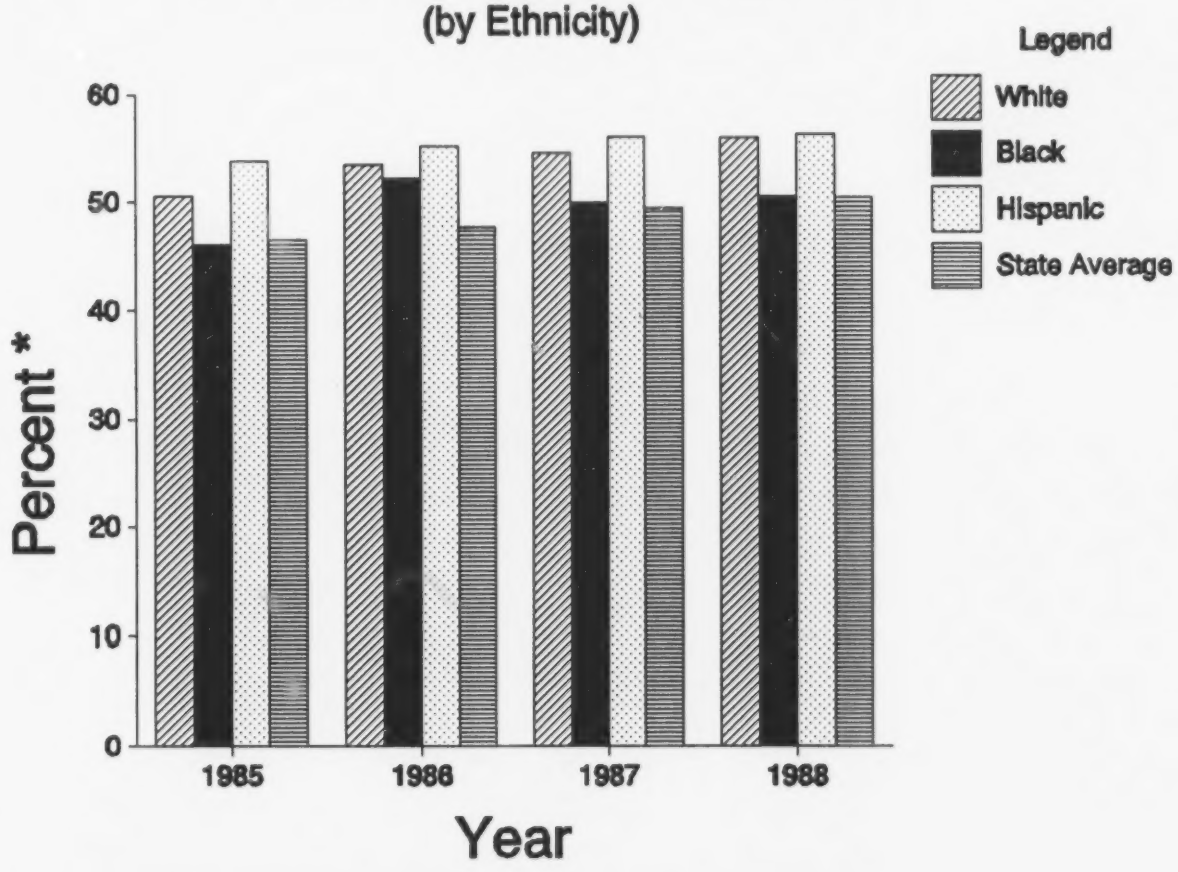


* % of total enrolled one year later

Figure 2

One-Year Retention of Del Mar Students in Texas Public Higher Education

(by Ethnicity)



* % of Total Enrolled one year later

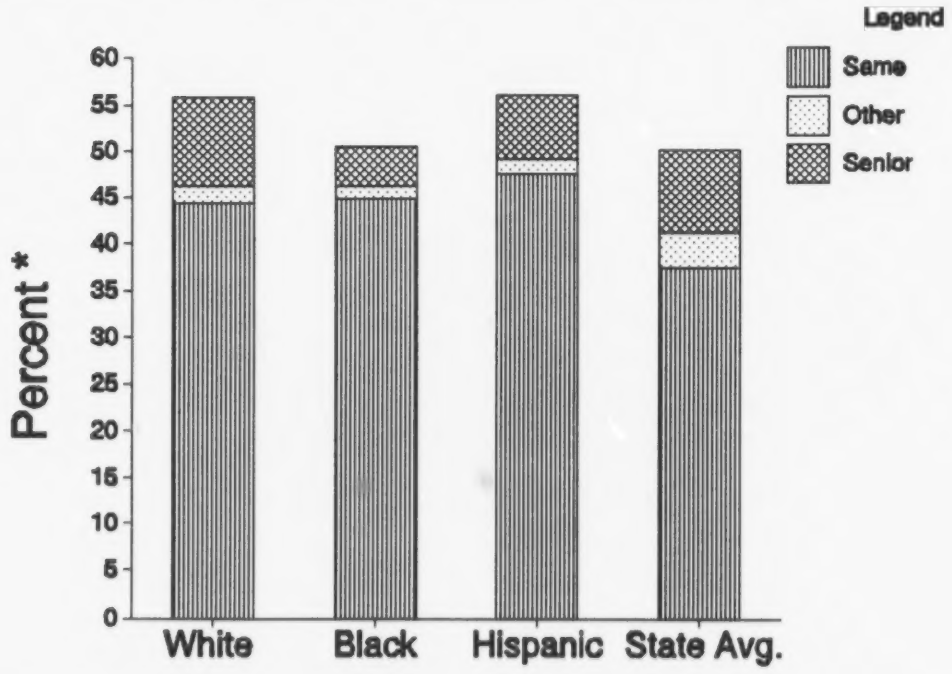
These students were enrolled in one of the following:

a) Same institution
b) Other Community College
c) Senior College or University
d) Concurrent Enrollment in 2 or more above

There is no data yet available for Private Institutions or out-of-state institutions.

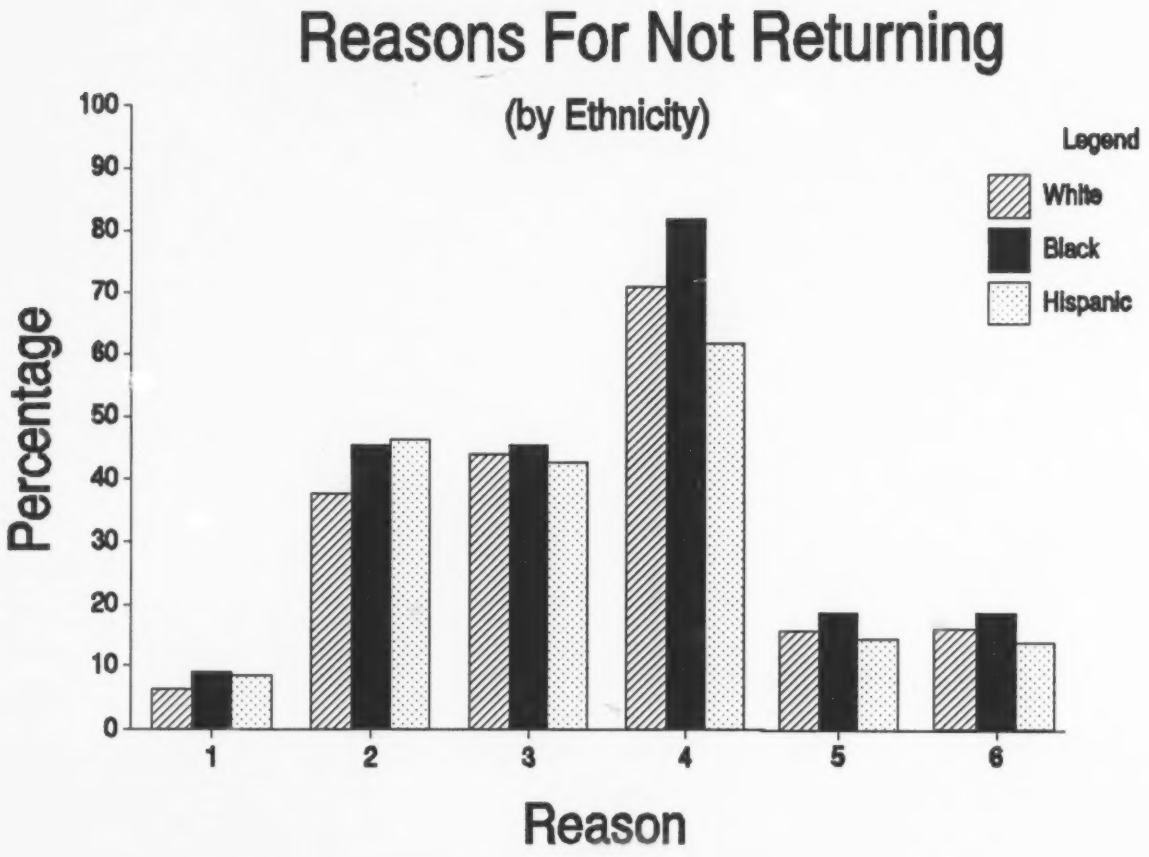
Figure 2a

Student Migration at Del Mar College in 1988 along with Texas State Averages



* % of total enrolled one year later

Figure 4



1 = I accomplished my learning goals.

2 = Lack of money.

3 = Lack of time.

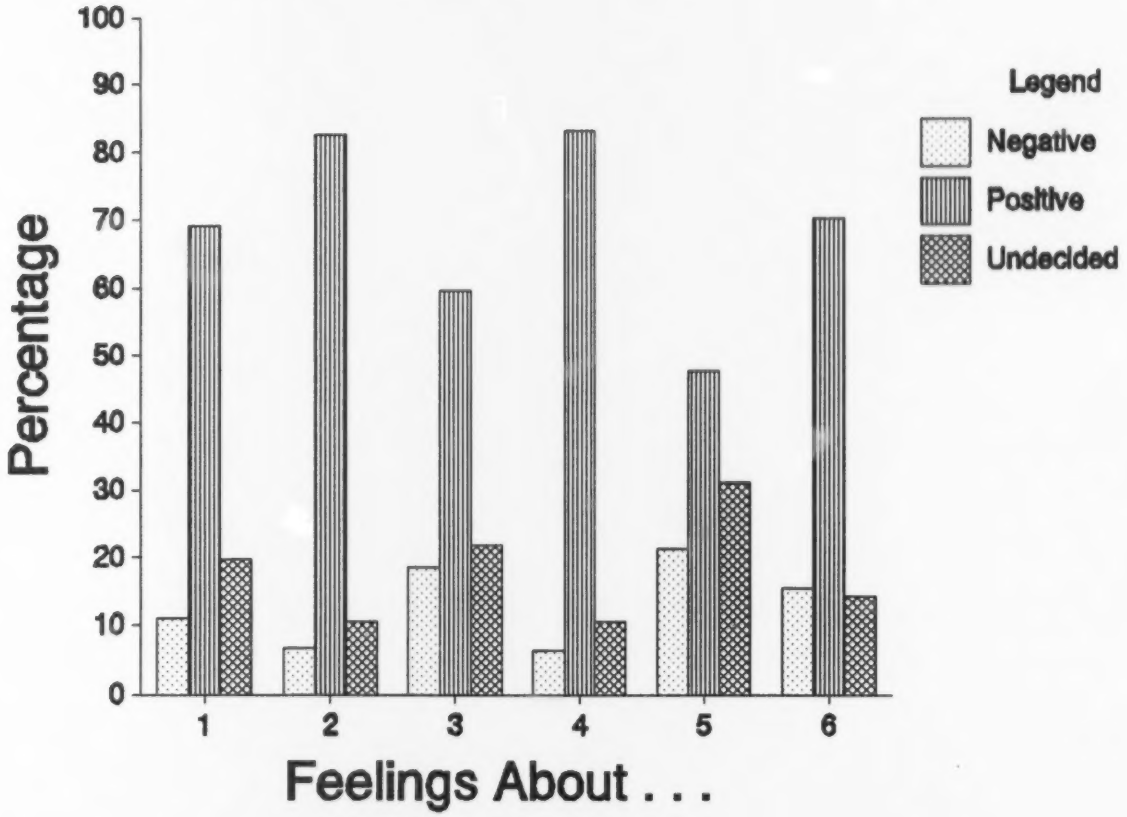
4 = Other events or circumstances in my life.

5 = I was unhappy with what I got in the classes.

6 = I was unhappy with something else about the school.

Figure 5

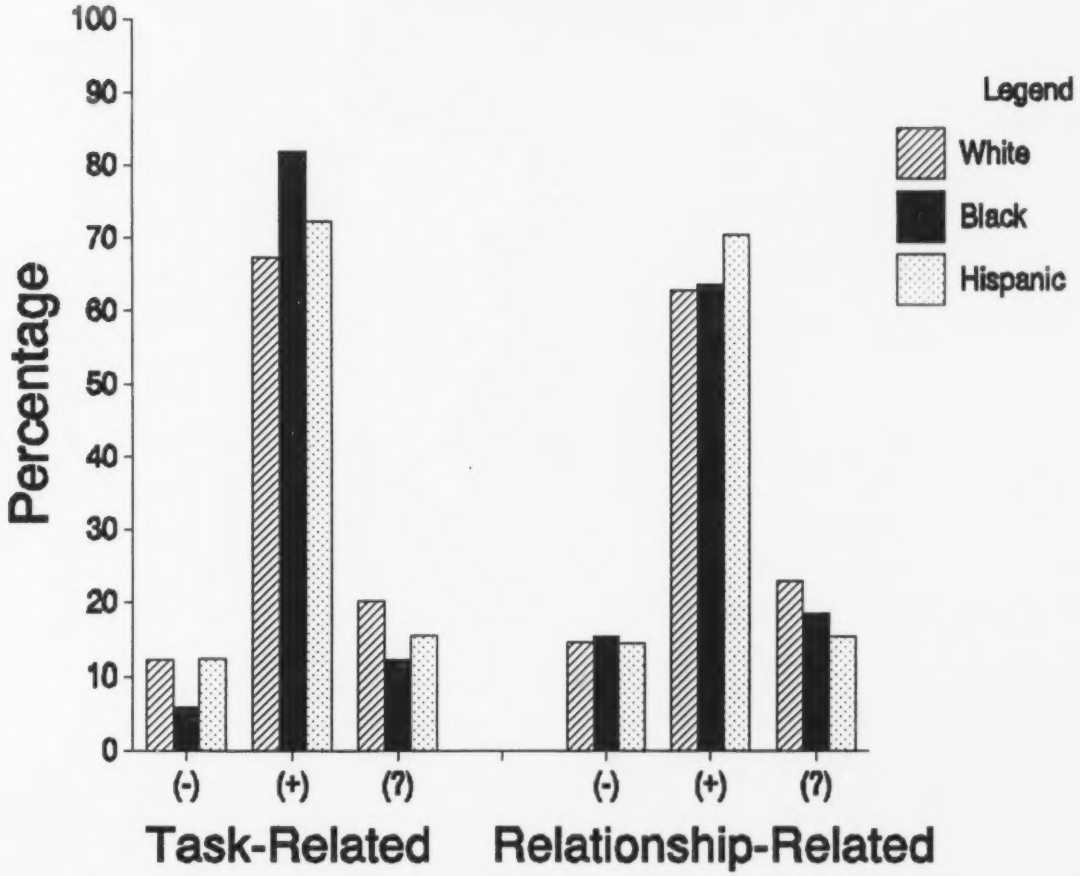
Nonreturnees' Feelings About Del Mar



1 = My Grades.
2 = How much I learned.
3 = What I learned that helped on my job or elsewhere.
4 = My enjoyment of the class.
5 = Things that happened in school but not in class.
6 = How well I got to know the teachers.

Figure 6

Nonreturnees' Feelings About Del Mar (by Ethnicity)



Task-Related - My grades
How much I learned
What I learned that helped my job, etc.

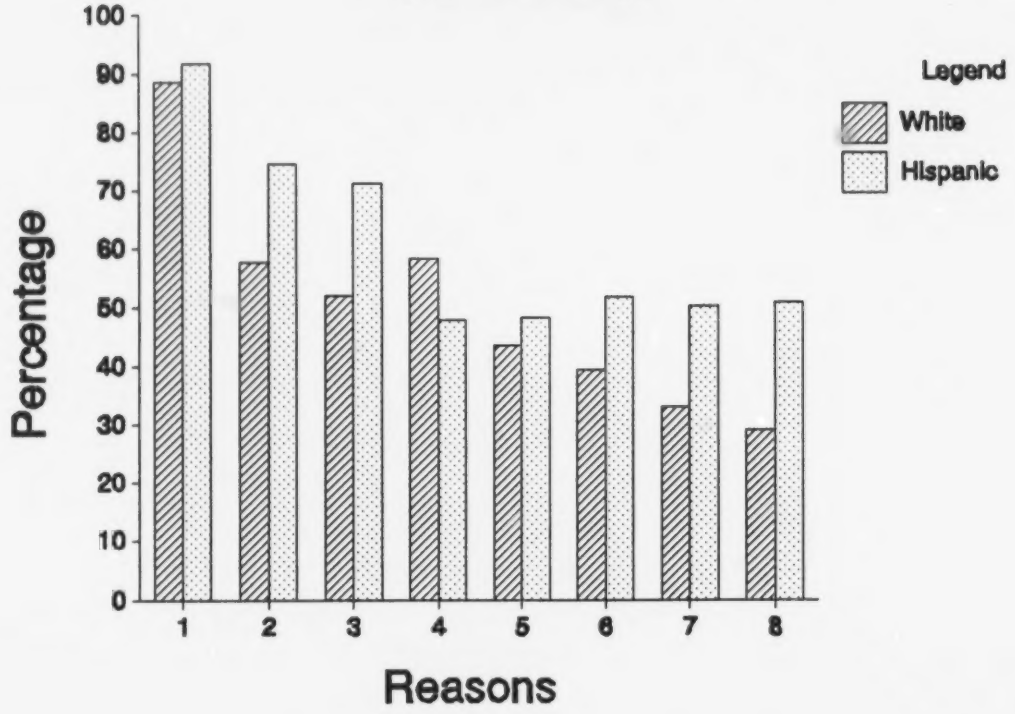
Relationship-Related - My enjoyment of the class
Things that happened in school
How well I got to know the teachers

Figure 7

Nonreturnees

Top Reasons For Attending Del Mar

(by Ethnicity)



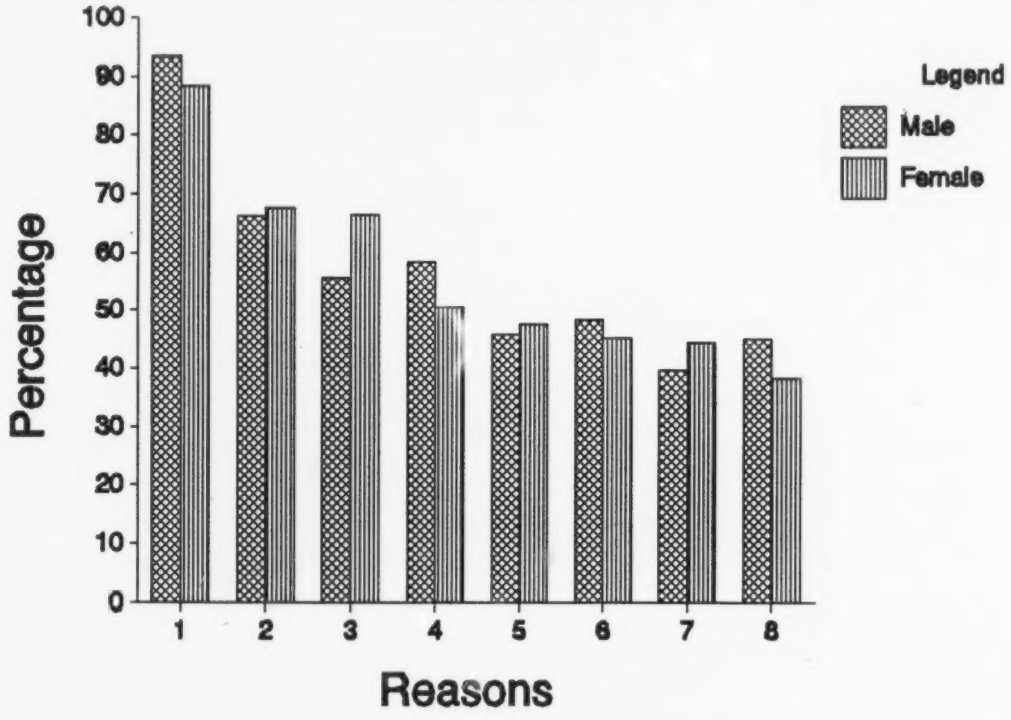
1 = For my personal improvement.
2 = Be with interesting people.
3 = Get job skills so I can get a job.
4 = Take courses to transfer to another school.
5 = Get a license or other credential needed for my work.
6 = Have something to do.
7 = Get more job skills so I can get a raise or promotion.
8 = Learn about a subject I will use in my leisure time.

Figure 8

Nonreturnees

Top Reasons For Attending Del Mar

(by Gender)



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7 = Get more job skills so I can get a raise or promotion.
8 = Learn about a subject I will use in my leisure time.

NON-CONTINUING STUDENTS

DROP-OUT...
(I WILL NOT BE BACK)

STOP-OUT...
(I WILL BE BACK)

OPT-OUT...
(I'VE DONE WHAT I CAME TO DO!!!)